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Waltzing Through Europe

*Attitudes towards Couple
Dances in the Long
Nineteenth Century*

Egil Bakka, Theresa Jill Buckland,
Helena Saarikoski & Anne
von Bibra Wharton (eds.)

Cambridge, UK: Open Book
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Waltzing Through Europe is an impressive result of collaboration within an international group of ethnochoreologists and dance historians. The authors focus on the social, historical and choreological history of round dances in Europe during the “long nineteenth century.” The different texts make it possible to compare socio-cultural and political reactions to the arrival and practice of popular couple dances, waltz, and polka as the most typical, known as round dances. The focus of the book is on the analysis of meanings and forms of round dances. It reviews various materials on these dances and reflects on the cultural, ideological, and political discourses that have developed around them. With good reason, it can be said that *Waltzing Through Europe* is a unique example of collaboration in dance historiography and cultural history across borders and genres.

An interesting detail is that the book consists largely of case studies from European countries that were not yet independent states in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, being usually part of a larger empire or kingdom, either as provinces or autonomous regions. There are well-argued reasons for this solution since the European history of dance has largely been written from the perspective of Europe’s major cultural centers and the research has been based on material from these regions. The research material has moreover typically consisted of sources written in the dominant languages of Europe, such as English, French, German, or Italian.

Indeed, one of the most significant achievements of this book is that it draws on a much wider range of primary sources in a greater variety of languages than has been the custom in European dance studies, which naturally helps to better understand the reception of round dances outside major European cities. This does not mean, however, that the dance culture of European courts has been completely left out of the book, but the court dances do not dominate the examination of the subject as is usually the case in dance history literature. As a whole, the book offers a culturally and socially rare diverse overview of the prevalence and reception of dance phenomena under investigation.

The book can roughly be divided into two parts according to the types of sources used in the different chapters. Jörgen Torp, Daniela Stavělová, Dorota Gremlicová, László Felföldi, Iva Niemčić and Ivana Katarinčić mostly deal with early nineteenth-century dance history, and their texts are typically based on published material, literary works, newspaper articles or reports by historians. Sille Kapper, Mats Nilsson and Helena Saarikoski rely for their part mainly on material from folklorists, ethnographers, ethnologists, and folk dance collectors in their texts about twentieth-century writings. This material was usually

collected and published in the twentieth century, and the information they contain does not generally cover the early nineteenth century.

However, there are three chapters in the book that differ from this division. Chapter 8 (“The Waltz among Slovenians”) by Rebeka Kunej examines meanings and forms of the waltz in Slovenia and it covers both centuries, being based equally on published and archival material. Egil Bakka uses historical sources, other than folklorist or ethnographic material, for the investigation of dance bans in twentieth-century Norway in chapter 12 (“The Ban on Round Dances 1917–1957”). Tvrtko Zebec, for his part, uses material from ethnographic fieldwork in chapter 15 (“A Twenty-First Century Resurrection”) which examines a special kind of popular culture polka in Croatia in the twenty-first century.

One of the most intriguing themes of the book is the connection between nationalism and dance, and it appears in several chapters. It is addressed that nations have used dances as symbols of national identities and characteristics throughout their history, but in many cases the development has not been totally consistent. The book gives an example of the introduction of the waltz in Slovenia in the late eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, when it was seen as German cultural imperialist influence and highly immoral, and the same attitude was also met in Croatia in the nineteenth century. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the waltz was associated with Slovenian culture and Slovenian values, as it was now seen as part of the national cultural heritage and a protection against foreign influences, such as the tango.

In addition, there are comments on reactions to round dances in different parts of Europe in the book. Restrictions and prohibitions have been the result of moral panic that these dances have caused among certain groups of people. It is fascinating to read about different perspectives on these phenomena in European countries. Young people’s social dancing has in particular been a constant source for moral panic for centuries. “The dances and dance events themselves are then the folk devils that are believed to ruin young people” (Nilsson p. 379).

In many ways, *Waltzing Through Europe* is a long-awaited novelty in dance studies. The authors with multiple backgrounds provide perspectives of historiography, cultural memory, and folklore to the research of social dance. Furthermore, the book can be seen as reinforcing the status of dance history within the larger cultural historical context. The authors have been able to focus on dance as an active and constructive element of society and culture, and therefore it can be expected that the book will reach a readership outside of dance scholars and dance enthusiasts as well. Hopefully, the book will give new impetus to further investigation of forms and histories of social dancing, which has been neglected to a great extent so far.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that the book utilises scannable QR codes to embed visual and audio material, for example videos of dance performances, within the text. This gives the book a living character as the reader can see the material in motion as well. Moreover, several illustrations – drawings, paintings, photographs, and maps – make the content even more vivid. Stylistically, the

authors have succeeded in creating both academic research reports and fascinating narratives at the same time, making it hard to put the book down once one has begun to read it. ■